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The Silent Slaughter of the US Air War

By Nicolas J. S. Davies
May 10, 2017

April 2017 was another month of mass slaughter and unimaginable terror for the people of Mosul in Iraq and the areas around Raqqa and Tabqa in Syria, as the heaviest, most sustained U.S.-led bombing campaign since the American War in Vietnam entered its 33rd month.

The Airwars monitoring group has compiled reports of 1,280 to 1,744 civilians killed by at least 2,237 bombs and missiles that rained down from U.S. and allied warplanes in April (1,609 on Iraq and 628 on Syria). The heaviest casualties were in and around Old Mosul and West Mosul, where 784 to 1,074 civilians were reported killed, but the area around Tabqa in Syria also suffered heavy civilian casualties.

In other war zones, as I have explained in previous articles (here and here), the kind of “passive” reports of civilian deaths compiled by Airwars have only ever captured between 5 percent and 20 percent of the actual civilian war deaths revealed by comprehensive mortality studies. Iraqbodycount, which used a similar methodology to Airwars, had only counted 8 percent of the deaths discovered by a mortality study in occupied Iraq in 2006.

Airwars appears to be collecting reports of civilian deaths more thoroughly than Iraqbodycount 11 years ago, but it classifies large numbers of them as “contested” or “weakly reported,” and is deliberately conservative in its counting. For instance, in some cases, it has counted local media

reports of “many deaths” as a minimum of one death, with no maximum figure. This is not to fault Airwars’ methods, but to recognize its limitations in contributing to an actual estimate of civilian deaths.

Allowing for various interpretations of Airwars’ data, and assuming that, like such efforts in the past, it is capturing between 5 percent and 20 percent of actual deaths, a serious estimate of the number of civilians killed by the U.S.-led bombing campaign since 2014 would by now have to be somewhere between 25,000 and 190,000.

The Pentagon recently revised its own facetious estimate of the number of civilians it has killed in Iraq and Syria since 2014 to 352. That is less than a quarter of the 1,446 victims whom Airwars has positively identified by name.

Airwars has also collected reports of civilians killed by Russian bombing in Syria, which outnumbered its reports of civilians killed by U.S.-led bombing for most of 2016. However, since the U.S.-led bombing escalated to over 10,918 bombs and missiles dropped in the first three months of 2017, the heaviest bombardment since the campaign began in 2014, Airwars’ reports of civilians killed by U.S.-led bombing have surpassed reports of deaths from Russian bombing.

Because of the fragmentary nature of all Airwars’ reports, this pattern may or may not accurately reflect whether the US or Russia has really killed more civilians in each of these periods. There are many factors that could affect that.

For example, Western governments and NGOs have funded and supported the White Helmets and other groups who report civilian casualties caused by Russian bombing, but there is no equivalent Western support for the reporting of civilian casualties from the Islamic State-held areas that the US and its allies are bombing. If Airwars’ reporting is capturing a greater proportion of actual deaths in one area than another due to factors like this, it could lead to differences in the numbers of reported deaths that do not reflect differences in actual deaths.

Shock, Awe ... and Silence

To put the 79,000 bombs and missiles with which the US and its allies have bombarded Iraq and Syria since 2014 in perspective, it is worth reflecting back to the “more innocent” days of “Shock and Awe” in March 2003. As NPR reporter Sandy Tolan reported in 2003, one of the architects of that campaign predicted that dropping 29,200 bombs and missiles on Iraq would have, “the non-nuclear equivalent of the impact that the atomic weapons dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki had on Japan.”

When “Shock and Awe” was unleashed on Iraq in 2003, it dominated the news all over the world. But after eight years of “disguised, quiet, media-free” war under President Obama, the US mass media don’t even treat the daily slaughter from this heavier, more sustained bombardment of Iraq and Syria as news. They cover single mass casualty events for a few days, but quickly resume normal “Trump Show” programming.

As in George Orwell's *1984*, the public knows that our military forces are at war with somebody somewhere, but the details are sketchy. "Is that still a thing?" "Isn't North Korea the big issue now?"

There is almost no political debate in the US over the rights and wrongs of the US bombing campaign in Iraq and Syria. Never mind that bombing Syria without authorization from its internationally recognized government is a crime of aggression and a violation of the U.N. Charter. The freedom of the United States to violate the UN Charter at will has already been politically (not legally!) normalized by 17 years of serial aggression, from the bombing of Yugoslavia in 1999 to the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, to drone strikes in Pakistan and Yemen.

So who will enforce the Charter now to protect civilians in Syria, who already face violence and death from all sides in a bloody civil and proxy war, in which the US was already deeply complicit well before it began bombing Syria in 2014?

In terms of US law, three successive US regimes have claimed that their unconstrained violence is legally justified by the Authorization for the Use of Military Force passed by the US Congress in 2001. But sweeping as it was, that bill said only,

"That the President is authorized to use all necessary and appropriate force against those nations, organizations, or persons he determines planned, authorized, committed or aided the terrorist attacks that occurred on September 11th, 2001, or harbored such organizations or persons, in order to prevent any future acts of international terrorism against the United States by such nations, organizations or persons."

How many of the thousands of civilians the US has killed in Mosul in the past few months played any such role in the September 11th terrorist attacks? Every person reading this knows the answer to that question: probably not one of them. If one of them was involved, it would be by sheer coincidence.

Any impartial judge would reject a claim that this legislation authorized 16 years of war in at least eight countries, the overthrow of governments that had nothing to do with 9/11, the killing of about 2 million people and the destabilization of country after country – just as surely as the judges at Nuremberg rejected the German defendants' claims that they invaded Poland, Norway and the U.S.S.R. to prevent or "preempt" imminent attacks on Germany.

US officials may claim that the 2002 Iraq AUMF legitimizes the bombardment of Mosul. That law at least refers to the same country. But while it is also still on the books, the whole world knew within months of its passage that it used false premises and outright lies to justify overthrowing a government that the US has since destroyed.

The US war in Iraq officially ended with the withdrawal of the last US occupation forces in 2011. The AUMF did not and could not possibly have approved allying with a new regime in Iraq 14 years later to attack one of its cities and kill thousands of its people.

Caught in a Web of War Propaganda

Do we really not know what war is? Has it been too long since Americans experienced war on our own soil? Perhaps. But as thankfully distant as war may be from most of our daily lives, we cannot pretend that we do not know what it is or what horrors it brings.

This month, two friends and I visited our Congresswoman's office representing our local Peace Action affiliate, Peace Justice Sustainability Florida, to ask her to cosponsor legislation to prohibit a US nuclear first strike; to repeal the 2001 AUMF; to vote against the military budget; to cut off funding for the deployment of US ground troops to Syria; and to support diplomacy, not war, with North Korea.

When one of my friends explained that he'd fought in Vietnam and started to talk about what he'd witnessed there, he had to stop to keep from crying. But the staffer didn't need him to go on. She knew what he was talking about. We all do.

But if we all have to see dead and wounded children in the flesh before we can grasp the horror of war and take serious action to stop it and prevent it, then we face a bleak and bloody future. As my friend and too many like him have learned at incalculable cost, the best time to stop a war is before it starts, and the main lesson to learn from every war is: "Never again!"

Both Barack Obama and Donald Trump won the presidency partly by presenting themselves as "peace" candidates. This was a carefully calculated and calibrated element in both their campaigns, given the pro-war records of their main opponents, John McCain and Hillary Clinton. The American public's aversion to war is a factor that every US president and politician has to deal with, and promising peace before spinning us into war is an American political tradition that dates back to Woodrow Wilson and Franklin Roosevelt.

As Reichsmarschall Hermann Goering admitted to American military psychologist Gustave Gilbert in his cell at Nuremberg, "Naturally, the common people don't want war; neither in Russia nor in England nor in America, nor for that matter in Germany. That is understood. But, after all, it is the leaders of the country who determine the policy and it is always a simple matter to drag the people along, whether it is a democracy or a fascist dictatorship or a Parliament or a Communist dictatorship."

"There is one difference," Gilbert insisted, "In a democracy, the people have some say in the matter through their elected representatives, and in the United States only Congress can declare wars."

Goering was unimpressed by Madison's and Hamilton's cherished constitutional safeguards. "Oh, that is all well and good," he replied, "but, voice or no voice, the people can always be brought to the bidding of the leaders. That is easy. All you have to do is tell them that they are being attacked and denounce the pacifists for lack of patriotism and exposing the country to danger. It works the same way in any country."

Our commitment to peace and our abhorrence of war are too easily undermined by the simple but timeless techniques Goering described. In the US today, they are enhanced by several other factors, most of which also had parallels in World War Two Germany:

- Mass media that suppress public awareness of the human costs of war, especially when US policy or US forces are responsible.
- A media blackout on voices of reason who advocate alternative policies based on peace, diplomacy or the rule of international law.
- In the ensuing silence regarding rational alternatives, politicians and media present “doing something,” meaning war, as the only alternative to the perennial straw man of “doing nothing.”
- The normalization of war by stealth and deception, especially by public figures otherwise seen as trustworthy, like President Obama.
- The dependence of progressive politicians and organizations on funding from labor unions that have become junior partners in the military industrial complex.
- The political framing of US disputes with other countries as entirely the result of actions by the other side, and the demonization of foreign leaders to dramatize and popularize these false narratives.
- The pretense that the US role in overseas wars and global military occupation stems from a well-meaning desire to help people, not from US strategic ambitions and business interests.

Taken altogether, this amounts to a system of war propaganda, in which the heads of TV networks bear a share of responsibility for the resulting atrocities along with political and military leaders. Trotting out retired generals to bombard the home front with euphemistic jargon, without disclosing the hefty directors’ and consultants’ fees they collect from weapons manufacturers, is only one side of this coin.

The equally important flip-side is the media’s failure to even cover wars or the US role in them, and their systematic marginalization of anyone who suggests there is anything morally or legally wrong with America’s wars.

The Pope and Gorbachev

Pope Francis recently suggested that a third party could act as a mediator to help resolve our country’s nearly 70-year-old conflict with North Korea. The Pope suggested Norway. Even more importantly, the Pope framed the problem as a dispute between the United States and North Korea, not, as US officials do, as North Korea posing a problem or a threat to the rest of the world.

This is how diplomacy works best, by correctly and honestly identifying the roles that different parties are playing in a dispute or a conflict, and then working to resolve their disagreements and

conflicting interests in a way that both sides can live with or even benefit from. The JCPOA that resolved the US dispute with Iran over its civilian nuclear program is a good example of how this can work.

This kind of real diplomacy is a far cry from the brinksmanship, threats and aggressive alliances that have masqueraded as diplomacy under a succession of US presidents and secretaries of state since Truman and Acheson, with few exceptions. The persistent desire of much of the US political class to undermine the JCPOA with Iran is a measure of how US officials cling to the use of threats and brinksmanship and are offended that the “exceptional” United States should have to come down from its high horse and negotiate in good faith with other countries.

At the root of these dangerous policies, as historian William Appleman Williams wrote in *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy* in 1959, lies the mirage of supreme military power that seduced US leaders after the allied victory in the Second World War and the invention of nuclear weapons. After running headlong into the reality of an unconquerable post-colonial world in Vietnam, this American Dream of ultimate power faded briefly, only to be reborn with a vengeance after the end of the Cold War.

Much as its defeat in the First World War was not decisive enough to convince Germany that its military ambitions were doomed, a new generation of US leaders saw the end of the Cold War as their chance to “kick the Vietnam syndrome” and revive America’s tragic bid for “full spectrum dominance.”

As Mikhail Gorbachev lamented in a speech in Berlin on the 25th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall in 2014, “the West, and particularly the United States, declared victory in the Cold War. Euphoria and triumphalism went to the heads of Western leaders. Taking advantage of Russia’s weakening and the lack of a counterweight, they claimed monopoly leadership and domination of the world, refusing to heed words of caution from many of those present here.”

This post-Cold War triumphalism has predictably led us into an even more convoluted maze of delusions, disasters and dangers than the Cold War itself. The folly of our leaders’ insatiable ambitions and recurrent flirtations with mass extinction are best symbolized by the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists’ Doomsday Clock, whose hands once again stand at two and a half minutes to midnight.

The inability of the costliest war machine ever assembled to defeat lightly-armed resistance forces in country after country, or to restore stability to any of the countries it has destroyed, has barely dented the domestic power of the US military-industrial complex over our political institutions and our national resources. Neither millions of deaths, trillions of dollars wasted, nor abject failure on its own terms has slowed the mindless spread and escalation of the “global war on terror.”

Futurists debate whether robotic technology and artificial intelligence will one day lead to a world in which autonomous robots could launch a war to enslave and destroy the human race, maybe even incorporating humans as components of the machines that will bring about our extinction. In the US armed forces and military industrial complex, have we already created

exactly such a semi-human, semi-technological organism that will not stop bombing, killing and destroying unless and until we stop it in its tracks and dismantle it?